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RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 1021
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 0895
RUEHIT/AMCONSUL ISTANBUL 1469
RHMFIUU/CDR USCENCOM MACDILL AFB FL
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RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
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SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: NGO FORUM "EARLY HOLIDAY PRESENT" FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

11. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Not for public Internet.

12. (U) SUMMARY: On December 24, USAID implementing partner International Center for Not-for-Profit Law (ICNL) organized a roundtable on NGOs' Participation in the National Reforms that attracted over 50 representatives from government and civic organizations. The event was one of the first opportunities in recent memory for independent NGOs, initiative groups, and government representatives to meet together in public. Participants openly bemoaned the lack of a vibrant small and medium enterprise business sector and agreed on the importance of joining public and government efforts to speed the democratization process and increase civic activism. Government participants acknowledged during a coffee break that they were impressed by one participant's speech, because it addressed a recognized problem in a frank manner. An Institute for Democracy and Human Rights representative suggested that one potential role for NGOs was to increase their civic education efforts in rural areas. The event significantly contributed to building new avenues for dialogue between NGOs and government. Both NGO and government representatives expressed a desire to hold similar forums on a quarterly basis, and the Institute offered to convene the next event. END SUMMARY.

GOVERNMENT SIGNALS DESIRE FOR JOINT EVENTS

13. (U) USAID's implementing partner ICNL organized a roundtable on December 24 for local civic actors and government officials to discuss ways in which NGOs might contribute to ongoing government reform plans. Over 50 representatives from both registered and unregistered civic organizations and government entities, including the Institute for Democracy and Human Rights, and the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Economy and Finance, and Justice participated in the event.

14. (U) The event had been rescheduled from the original late November date after the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' America's Desk Chief summoned USAID Country Representative to the MFA on November 26 to discuss the event. In the meeting, the MFA representative suggested that for an event of this nature, government

representatives should be invited, and if they were not, perhaps it meant that ICNL had the intention to work against the government. (COMMENT: Government officials were both desired and welcomed by USAID/ICNL at this event. Post believes that capacity constraints at MFA combined with the usual one-week advance notice protocol for USAID events prevented the MFA from arranging government participation on the original date. END COMMENT.) Although the country representative stressed the event could proceed as proposed, USAID offered to postpone the event in order to secure MFA's support in inviting government participants.

FRANK DISCUSSION OF PRESSING ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL ISSUES

15. (U) The chairman of the Union of Entrepreneurs opened the Forum by stating that small and medium enterprises' share of GDP was a mere 0.4 % in 2008 compared to 4.0% in 1998, which he called "a real shame." He severely criticized existing bureaucratic barriers to SME development, such as registration procedures and the role of the commodity exchange. He also highlighted the lack of existing monitoring mechanisms for commercial law and the lack of a national body for entrepreneurs' support. The speech's language was so strong that organizers were concerned that it might destroy the atmosphere of trust that they were trying to foster through the forum. Instead, even the government participants acknowledged during the coffee break that they were impressed by his speech since it addressed a recognized problem in a direct manner.

16. (U) Next, the director of "Hemayat," a registered local organization, made a presentation on its business education activities, which includes training for disabled youth. (COMMENT: Hemayat, like many other NGO-like organizations in Turkmenistan, provides services normally associated with NGOs, but is actually registered as an "economic society" due to the difficult registration procedures for NGOs and the economic benefits unavailable to NGOs, such as an ability to charge for services. END

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COMMENT.) She emphasized NGOs' positive role of providing social services, and made a favorable impression on participants by discussing a disabled young man, who won numerous Special Olympics medals and later became a business trainer. Claiming that his integration into society was a direct contribution of the NGO sector, she concluded her speech by stating, "We've just heard from the Entrepreneurs' Union head that Turkmenistan will not have a future without entrepreneurship development. I want to add that Turkmenistan will not have a future without building civic society."

17. (U) Presentations by other participants continued to make the case for the positive role of NGOs in society. Various questions to Ministry of Justice representatives addressed the importance of streamlining the registration process. Throughout the forum, government representatives took detailed notes of the discussions.

GROWING ACCEPTANCE FOR THE ROLE OF NGOS IN CIVIL SOCIETY

18. (U) During its formal statement, a representative from the Institute of Democracy and Human Rights expressed sincere gratitude to the participants and organizers, and said that the forum's discussion would contribute to developing a national concept for civil society development in Turkmenistan. She spoke of the need to consolidate public and government efforts in the ongoing process of democratization and to increase civic activism. In her concluding speech, the same representative emotionally stressed that the population's low level of education and civic awareness was a real challenge to the democratization and reform process. One possible contribution of NGOs would be to undertake civic education activities, especially in rural areas. She assured participants that democratization and support for civic activism is a reality of the day. "That's why one of the Institute's priorities in 2008 will be to strengthen our cooperation with USAID and ICNL."

19. (U) COMMENT: For the first time in recent memory, leading independent NGOs and initiative groups had the opportunity to demonstrate to government representatives their capacity to provide

professional services and to participate in the ongoing process of reforms. Especially noteworthy was that although the participating NGOs welcomed the organizational role played by USAID and ICNL, they wanted to play the lead role themselves during the forum, in order to demonstrate the grass-roots nature of the event. As a result, USAID's low-key role and the absence of other major donor organizations achieved the intended effect of increasing the NGOs' prestige in the eyes of the government participants. Both sides expressed a desire to hold similar forums on a quarterly basis, and the Institute offered to convene the next event. If eventually institutionalized, this event could be remembered as a catalytic step in the development of Turkmenistan's civil society. END COMMENT.

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